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International Terrorism: Prospects for the Spread of Violence to the United States in 1984

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An Intelligence Assessment

FBI Review Completed

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International Terrorism: Prospects for the Spread of Violence to the United States in 1984

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [] Instability
and Insurgency Center, Office of Global Issues.
Information about the United States was provided
by and coordinated with the Federal Bureau of
Investigation. The paper was also coordinated with
the Directorate of Operations. Comments and
questions are welcome and should be addressed to
the Chief, Terrorism Analysis Branch []

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 13 March 1984
was used in this report.*

The number of terrorist incidents committed in the United States declined last year and remained relatively low during the first quarter of 1984. Given the nature of terrorist groups and individuals willing to undertake terrorist actions, this situation could change quickly and without forewarning. Potential terrorist support networks are in place, and certain groups have the motivation to commit terrorist attacks in the United States—either opposition to US foreign policy or hatred of particular ethnic groups in residence here. Moreover, in our judgment, the United States—because of its open society and size—is vulnerable to terrorist operations. The groups most likely to initiate attacks in this country fall into two categories: the state supporters of terrorism—Iran, Libya—and separatist/irredentist groups—the Armenians, Palestinians, and Croats. Although Cuba supports terrorist activity in other regions, neither we nor the FBI has reliable information indicating that Havana is planning to instigate a terrorist attack in this country. Events like the Los Angeles Olympics, which could provide a worldwide stage for terrorist violence, offer an opportunity for the level of the threat to increase.

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Introduction

This report assesses the threat from foreign terrorist operations in the United States during the remainder of 1984. Our analysis focuses principally on the identification of major organized terrorist groups that by behavior or statements have indicated a willingness or intention to target the United States abroad. We have specifically excluded from consideration domestic groups and individuals—including those espousing Puerto Rican separation—because by statute they are the concern of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and state and local police agencies.

The relatively low level of foreign terrorist activity in the United States can be attributed to several factors, but we believe the primary reason is that those countries and groups we regard as potential threats have either suffered organizational setbacks or have more favorable theaters of operation abroad:

- The fundamentalist Islamic groups backed by Iran view the United States as their enemy, but it is easier for them to attack US interests in the Middle East and in Western Europe than in this country. Iranian activities in the United States over the past few years have been limited to procuring arms, proselytizing, collecting intelligence on opponents of the Khomeini regime, and infighting between pro- and anti-Khomeini groups.

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Recent US Activities by Foreign Terrorists

According to the FBI, the number of acts of terrorism committed in the United States by foreign terrorist groups has been small over the past several years. In fact, the Bureau reports that domestic terrorist incidents from all sources actually declined in number from 1982 to 1983 in spite of the publicity terrorists gained from the spectacular bombings in Beirut. We can make no correlation between increased terrorism abroad and increased terrorism in the United States. Consequently, we would not necessarily expect to see a rise in terrorist incidents in this country just because terrorism abroad had increased. Moreover, to the extent that politically motivated terrorism has been occurring in the United States, its perpetrators typically have been domestic US groups, like the Puerto Rican separatists, who link their actions to Latin American or Caribbean politics. The few terrorist attacks by foreign groups that have occurred in the United States have been limited in scope and aimed largely at the traditional enemies of those groups.

- The Palestinian groups in the United States—like their counterparts abroad—are preoccupied with an internal power struggle and serious infighting. They are watching the situation in the Middle East closely, particularly Arafat's actions, before deciding to change their tactics and engage in terrorism in the United States. The Palestinians in the United States also have generally chosen to avoid violence so as not to jeopardize their efforts to establish a political base of support here.
- The two principal Armenian terrorist groups—the leftwing Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the rightwing Justice Commandos for the Armenian Genocide (JCAG)—have staged a few attacks against Turkish targets in this country, but their major focus is on propaganda activities and fundraising. These groups have traditionally avoided attacks on US interests. Both organizations have been relatively quiet over the past few months: ASALA—rent by ideological feud—has been attempting to reorganize, and JCAG has been preoccupied with ongoing trials of its members in this country and in Yugoslavia. The FBI believes that an eventual return to attacks by these groups on their traditional enemies—the Turks—is inevitable.

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some domestic groups have in the past received various forms of support from Cuba. There are no indications that such support has increased recently or that Cuba is directing a terrorism offensive against the United States through these groups. However, other factors—particularly the Los Angeles Olympics—serve to increase the potential for terrorist activity from such domestic groups without foreign instigation.

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- The Libyan-sponsored terrorist activity in this country has been restricted to attempted assassinations of exiles—successful in at least one case. Involvement in a number of African insurgencies over the past two years, as well as in an attempt to obtain the chairmanship of the Organization for African Unity, probably contributed to Qadhafi's lack of focus on the United States as a target. There is evidence that he has recently begun a campaign against exiles in Western Europe, however, and he may attempt to resume this activity in the United States.
- The Cubans may provide some support to Puerto Rican separatist groups, but Castro appears to be standing by his policy of not directly sponsoring or initiating anti-American terrorism in the continental United States. Furthermore, we believe Havana is wary of the Reagan administration's willingness—as demonstrated in Grenada—to respond with direct action in the Caribbean to any perceived aggression by the Cubans.
- The Croatians, who in the past have directed attacks against Yugoslavians in the United States, are largely in disarray after suffering serious setbacks to their organization here. In 1981 several leading members were arrested and convicted of various charges relating to their terrorist activities. [REDACTED]

Another important factor in the low incidence of foreign terrorist attacks in the United States in the past several years is the tendency of many foreign terrorist groups—especially those on the left—to view the United States as a difficult environment in which to operate. These groups probably perceive the US security and intelligence agencies as highly efficient, US entry and exit procedures for foreigners more complicated than in most of Western Europe and certain parts of the Middle East, and US punishment as surer and harsher. Consequently, we suspect that most terrorist groups have concluded that, compared to attacks in the United States, attacks against US interests abroad are more cost effective, easier to carry out, promise less chance of retribution, and offer equal publicity benefits. [REDACTED]

Indications

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Other Potential Sources of Trouble

Many terrorist organizations that have attacked US interests abroad apparently pose little threat in the United States proper. The leftist/anarchist European groups like the Red Army Faction are in this category, along with most of the leftist insurgent groups in Latin America and elsewhere in the Third World that use terrorism among their tactics. In the past, such groups have rarely operated outside their traditional environments, and they have not established the support mechanisms in this country needed to facilitate operations here. Furthermore, the anti-US attitudes of these groups that have led them to attack US interests in their own countries have usually been expressed in the context of hatred for alleged US imperialism in their countries. Thus, an attempt by such a group to stage an attack in the United States would represent a major departure in both tactics and ideology. [REDACTED]

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A threat of unknown but worrisome proportions involves individuals already in residence in the United States—isolated sociopaths, for example, or ad hoc groups of crazies—who might identify with the causes or actions of foreign terrorists and seek on their own initiative to strike a complementary blow here. Spectacular terrorist acts, at home or abroad, often trigger copycat behavior in susceptible individuals. Because such people usually operate alone or in extremely small groups and because their activities are linked only tenuously—if at all—to foreign terrorist groups, they are hard to identify before the fact and their intentions are not discernible through intelligence collection or analysis. [REDACTED]

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the United States is vulnerable to attacks and because terrorist groups have potential support networks in place in the United States, the possibility that attacks might occur this year cannot be ignored. At least three occurrences could contribute to this:

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- Well-publicized, international events, such as the Olympics in Los Angeles, where various groups

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might be tempted either to air their grievances with the world watching or to use the occasion to embarrass the United States.

- Any international activity of the United States perceived as an immediate threat by certain regimes, especially those of Khomeini and Qadhafi, would give opportunity for violent response abroad limited only by the absence of vulnerable, high-profile US targets.
- Any spectacular terrorist incident abroad could inspire self-styled radicals, especially ones already resident here, to imitate such acts in the United States.

Although the latter two circumstances are virtually impossible to anticipate except in the most general sense, the potential offered by the Olympic Games this summer is an immediate and concrete problem.

[REDACTED]

Any foreign terrorist attacks in the United States this year are likely to be carried out by one of three countries supporting terrorism or one of the three terrorist groups espousing separatist/irredentist goals. All six are strongly motivated by either opposition to US foreign policy or hatred for ethnic groups resident in the United States, and all have demonstrated capability for staging violent terrorist attacks abroad. In addition, they have in place, to some degree, support networks in the United States or Canada made up of individuals who share common ethnic, religious, and political characteristics and who are available as passive supporters if not active co-conspirators or surrogates.

[REDACTED]

State Supporters

Iran. In our judgment, the Iranians are the greatest potential threat in this country. This threat would most likely be manifested by Iranian Government planned and supported attacks against US Government property or its prominent citizens, or by Shiite attacks inspired by fanaticism associated with events in the Middle East. Although the latter attacks probably would be less sophisticated, they cause greater concern because security officials are less

likely to receive prior warning. Violence directed against Iranian dissidents in this country is another possibility and a major concern:

- In November 1983 the FBI discovered that an Iranian student organization was planning a bombing attack against a theater in Seattle, where an audience of anti-Khomeini dissidents was expected. We do not know that Tehran had knowledge of this plot, but the incident substantiates our belief that dissidents in exile in this country—and in others—remain in danger of violence from pro-Khomeini fanatics.

[REDACTED]

According to FBI reporting, Khomeini has discussed an attack in this country with his compatriots in Iran because he believes that the US Government has targeted him for assassination. The FBI has no indication that he has specifically sent terrorists to the United States, but large numbers of Iranians are entering this country as students and a large Iranian population is already in residence here.

[REDACTED]

The Islamic Society is the largest student group here, and we know it receives government support. Apparently its main functions are to collect intelligence on the anti-Khomeini students and to disseminate pro-regime propaganda. We have no indication that the organization is planning terrorist attacks against the United States at this time, but its loose infrastructure could be used in the future at the direction of the Iranian Government. Similar student organizations in other countries have been used in the past to stir up trouble:

[REDACTED]

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We cannot conclude that Iranian student organizations are set up and controlled by Tehran to carry out terrorist attacks or violence against dissidents, but there is substantial evidence to indicate that such organizations are potential tools of the regime. []

Libya. Libyan dissidents in this country are in danger—as they are worldwide—of Tripoli-sponsored assassination attempts. []

- The recent bombings near the homes and businesses of exiles in London and Manchester—which were almost certainly carried out by Libyan terrorists—and the attack on the Libyan dissidents in front of the People's Bureau in London illustrate the intensity of Qadhafi's campaign in Great Britain.

The Libyan Government in the past directed assassination attempts in the United States (in at least one case successfully) by recruiting assailants from within the country. Use of this tactic in the United States is now difficult because Libya no longer has a diplomatic mission in this country to coordinate its terrorist attacks. (The only quasi-official Libyan presence here is a Students Bureau in McLean, Virginia.) Another constraint on Qadhafi's activities in the United States is the absence of both a US Embassy and a substantial US civilian population in Libya that could be used as hostages in a retaliatory situation. []

Qadhafi presently focuses his terrorist activities on Western Europe and Africa, where he is heavily involved with a number of insurgent groups. Given the accessibility of US interests and the extent of the Libyan presence in those areas, Qadhafi is more likely to limit his anti-US activities to attacks on our interests abroad:

- The extensive US presence in Western Europe offers Qadhafi an opportunity to engage in anti-US operations in an area where his infrastructure is already in place and his operations can be more easily launched, at least in the near term. []

Qadhafi has a mercurial temperament and could quickly and without forewarning become more willing to initiate direct terrorist actions in the United States. This might have been the case in 1981 when there was concern that he would dispatch hit squads to the United States to assassinate President Reagan in retaliation for the Gulf of Sidra incident. The squads apparently were never dispatched from Libya, but we believe that Qadhafi seriously considered doing so. []

Cuba. The Cuban Government in the past has provided financial, materiel, and political support to Puerto Rican separatist/irredentist groups that engage in terrorism and may do so in the future, although this cannot be substantiated. Havana views this support as an essential component of its role in leftwing revolutionary movements in the Western Hemisphere. Although we have no information that Havana is directly involved in instigating terrorist activities in this country, Castro can exploit the Puerto Rican independence issue and opposition to US foreign policy in Central America through indigenous groups that need little urging to attack the US Government.² []

We do not believe that the Cuban Government will change its position regarding terrorist activities in this country. The Cubans already benefit from the independent activities of a number of groups with whom they share common political views; moreover, in the wake of Grenada, they have become increasingly

² The FBI has stated publicly that most terrorist incidents in the United States in 1983 were related to Latin American or Caribbean politics. This includes Puerto Rican separatist and anti-Castro groups. The latter in the past has successfully engaged in violent attacks against Cuban and Soviet interests. []

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cautious about the risks of pushing the Reagan administration too far:

- In a speech in November in which he eulogized the Cubans killed in battle in Grenada, Castro took an uncharacteristically defensive line and gave no indication that he would attempt to counter the new US "activism" in the Caribbean. [REDACTED]

Separatist/Irredentist Groups

Palestinians. Like their counterparts in the Middle East, the two principal Palestinian organizations in this country, Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), are preoccupied with infighting.³ According to the FBI, most of the specific threats made by Palestinians in the United States are directed at other Palestinians, some of whom are US citizens. From what we know, the threats seem to be directed at individuals who hold particular views regarding intra-PLO politics. Unlike the Iranians, who are willing to target indiscriminately, Palestinian threats tend to be highly focused and not directed at symbolic targets. The lack of indiscriminate threats against US interests here can probably be attributed to Palestinian efforts to build a political base of support in the United States. [REDACTED]

The structure of the US branch of the Fatah organization directly parallels that in the Middle East: a faction loyal to Arafat and a rebel faction. Both segments apparently are watching the Middle East situation closely, but the FBI does not believe a terrorist attack in this country is likely during this period of confusion and disorganization. This could change as the Middle East situation unfolds and Arafat's position becomes clearer:

- The Arafat-led PLO continues to adhere to its decade-long ban on international terrorism, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Arafat will lift the ban if his political initiatives fail. We believe that this would occur only if Arafat feels that the survival of the PLO as an organization or his leadership is threatened. [REDACTED]

³ The Fatah mutiny against Arafat's leadership and policies in the spring of 1983 resulted in a de facto split within the PLO, and many radicals from other PLO groups—for example, the PFLP—have aligned themselves with the rebels. Although the PFLP leadership has publicly declared its support for Arafat, [REDACTED]

According to the FBI, the Fatah organization in the United States does have access to some weapons stocks. The Bureau linked the cache of remote-control devices and detonators found in Alexandria, Virginia, more than a year ago to Fatah. It concluded, however, that this materiel was designated for use overseas. It has yet to find caches of weapons targeted for use against US targets. [REDACTED]

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Rumors that the PFLP has been planning a terrorist attack in this country are unsubstantiated, and the FBI considers the evidence too circumstantial to confirm a real threat. Moreover, according to the FBI, the PFLP is principally involved in fundraising activities in the United States, especially the sale of its publications. We do not know if the proceeds are leaving this country. The PFLP apparently also is in close touch with Damascus, but we are not sure whether Damascus has any control over the organization's US branch. [REDACTED]

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Despite the infighting among the Fatah and PFLP groups, some positive interaction still exists, mostly through two organizations: the Palestinian Congress of North America (PCNA) and the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS). Although these contacts are mostly concerned with financial matters, they could potentially offer a mechanism for coordinating more radical Palestinian activities in this country. We have no indication that such coordination is occurring or is contemplated. [REDACTED]

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Armenians. The possibility of a direct threat to non-Turkish targets in the United States from Armenian terrorists is minimal at this time. The two major Armenian terrorist groups active in the United States—ASALA and JCAG—focus their attacks almost exclusively on their traditional enemy, the Turks. We expect that both groups will continue targeting Turkish installations and personnel in Western Europe and the Middle East. Although there has been a lull in this activity in recent months, we expect this to change. When the change comes, it could also have an impact on the domestic US scene. The ASALA organization in the United States presently lacks both discipline and leadership and suffers badly

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from fragmentation within its ranks over ideology and the issue of indiscriminate bombings. These same problems have so seriously disrupted ASALA in Western Europe and the Middle East that the group has not conducted any terrorist attacks since August 1983 when the group split. [REDACTED]

In our judgment, the Justice Commandos pose a more serious threat to Turkish targets in the United States than does ASALA. The accused slayer of the Turkish Consul General in Los Angeles in 1982 was recently convicted in California. Two JCAG members were sentenced on 9 March 1984 to 20 years in prison for the March 1983 assassination of the Turkish Ambassador to Yugoslavia. Neither we nor the FBI expects any immediate terrorist retaliation for these convictions. JCAG probably will refrain from any terrorist activities at least until the conclusion of another trial—which began on 31 January 1984 in California—involving five key members and the seizure of a bomb aboard an aircraft at Boston Airport in October 1982. In view of the Armenian community's support for the defendants, JCAG is unlikely to commit any attack that may reflect negatively on the possible acquittal of any of these defendants. [REDACTED]

Croatians. Croatian extremist groups have two goals: the destruction of the Yugoslav state and the establishment of an independent state of Croatia. To this end, various emigres have organized worldwide and aimed most of their attacks against Yugoslav officials. Croatian terrorists have sought not only to gain publicity for their cause but also to avenge the murders of Croatian emigre activists believed to have been committed by Yugoslav intelligence. [REDACTED]

The US organizations of the Croatian National Resistance and the Croatian Independence Movement were effectively weakened in 1981 and 1982 when several members were arrested and convicted of terrorist offenses. We concur with the FBI's assessment that these groups do not pose a major threat within the United States, although it is not inconceivable that they would attempt to attack Yugoslav targets at the Los Angeles Olympics. [REDACTED]

The Threat to the Olympics

Although we have no hard intelligence that any terrorist organization is planning an attack during the Los Angeles Olympics, the opportunity that such an event offers for terrorists to gain worldwide publicity is substantial. Attacks at the Olympics would probably come from state-sponsored terrorists who wish to attack the United States or certain separatist/irredentist groups whose traditional targets were in Los Angeles for the games. [REDACTED]

Because of the enmity with which Iran views the United States and the large concentration of Iranians in southern California (estimated at 200,000), the FBI considers—and we concur—that the greatest potential threat to the Games is Iranian directed or inspired terrorism. Given the size of the potential support network already in place and the availability of weapons and explosive materiel in the Los Angeles area, Iran would not need to send a "hit team" from the Middle East or Europe but could rely on assets such as the Shiite supporters already in place. In view of the potential seriousness of the Iranian threat, security agencies are watching the Iranian community very closely, and we should receive prior indication that an attack was being planned. [REDACTED]

The FBI is also particularly concerned about possible Armenian terrorist attacks against Turks. The Armenian community in southern California is estimated at 300,000. Trouble would most likely come from JCAG, which, unlike ASALA, is well organized and has tremendous resources in the area—sufficient to plan and stage a terrorist attack. In the past, however, JCAG has been careful to target Turkish diplomats, and CIA analysts believe that an attack at the Olympics would signify a radical change in their targeting strategy and would be counterproductive to the group's goal to develop a support base in this country. [REDACTED]

Actually, almost any terrorist group with sufficient motivation could probably attempt an attack during the Olympics. It is not difficult to procure weapons and explosives in the United States, and the numerous

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foreign communities throughout the country, and particularly in major metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, could certainly provide support networks. Various foreign groups have the motivation and the capability to attempt low-level violence, such as small-scale bombing attacks and shootings in the Los Angeles area. In most cases, we would not have much advance warning of these actions, but, given the security and intelligence precautions being taken for the Games, we would expect prior indications of any plans of a more sophisticated or large-scale attack.

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Other Possible Venues

The 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans and the Democratic and Republican conventions in San Francisco and Dallas this summer could attract terrorist groups—domestic or state sponsored—who see the events as an opportunity to attack the United States and exploit the media. These events probably would not attract separatist/irredentist groups because their traditional enemies would not be involved. There are no indications, however, that any foreign-based group is targeting these events. Moreover, we believe that the Olympics is a more attractive target for potential terrorist activity because of the worldwide interest and publicity the Games receive. It is unlikely that a foreign group contemplating a major attack at the Olympics would also have the resources to target one of these events.

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